



# San Luis Obispo County Drug and Alcohol Advisory Board

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## Perinatal Substance Abuse Services Position Statement Adopted June 8, 2006

### Problem Statement

Perinatal Substance Abuse refers to the early exposure (either in utero or post-birth up to 3 years of age) of a child to substances, such as alcohol and illegal drugs, that can adversely affect the normal development and/or adequate care of the child.

According to a study conducted by the First 5 Commission for Children of San Luis Obispo County in 2004<sup>1</sup>, 40% of pregnant women in SLO County were using alcohol or illegal drugs before they knew they were pregnant, and 27% continued to use these substances after finding out they were pregnant. In comparing pregnant women in San Luis Obispo County to the approximately 15,000 pregnant women in other communities around the nation who have been screened and assessed for substance use, the rates for illegal drug use were found to be comparable. Interestingly, however, women in San Luis Obispo County consumed alcohol at a higher rate during early pregnancy (35% locally vs. 22% nationally); continued use of alcohol at a higher rate after learning of their pregnancy (22% locally vs. 11% nationally); and consumed alcohol more frequently (14% drank 3 to 7 days per week vs. 9% in other communities).

Perinatal substance abuse has a multitude of significant negative consequences, both for the developing child and for the larger community. As noted by the First 5 Commission, the findings in our County have tremendous implications for children, since even minimal amounts of alcohol can affect fetal brain development and lead to negative changes in long-term behavior, learning and overall mental health. The long-term consequences for the community can be even more significant, including increased health-care costs, and the need for educational assistance, mental-health care, and even criminal-justice intervention. Thus, the overall quality of life of the community is jeopardized by perinatal substance abuse.

### Treatment Modalities

Proven treatment modalities for perinatal substance abuse include residential treatment, individual and group counseling, twelve-step meetings, social and recreational activities,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sanluischildren.org/index2.html>

educational and vocational services, life-skills training, primary health care, perinatal health care, HIV and Hepatitis C Virus testing and counseling, AIDS prevention programs, programs for family members, relapse-prevention services, continuing-care programs and a wide array of supportive services such as child care, transportation and parenting-skills development.

In San Luis Obispo County, the objective of Perinatal Substance Abuse Services is to help substance abusing and dependent mothers restructure their lives so that they can handle their parenting responsibilities as well as remain drug-free. The program is a collaborative effort of many agencies and nonprofits that deal with pre- and postnatal issues for drug- and alcohol-affected infants and children. As a result of this program, many drug- and alcohol-affected children have been able to remain in the custody of their mothers as long as those mothers actively participate in the program. Additionally, the County's perinatal program has been working with women who were using drugs and other substances during their pregnancy to ensure a healthier gestation period for their babies and to reduce the number of babies testing positive for substances of abuse at the time of birth.

Another element of the program, offered in conjunction with the Tri-Counties Regional Center, provides for early sensory stimulation of drug-affected infants. This program allows the child to develop new areas of the brain to compensate for those areas that have been damaged by drug exposure.

In addition, fathers of drug-affected infants may receive their own support and services through the Drug Dependency Court. This program offers parents who have been involved with criminal drug/alcohol activity the opportunity to reunify with their children. This program results in an overall reduction in "out-of-home" placements.

### **Proven Outcomes**

According to research conducted at the Institute for Health Policy Studies at the University of California, San Francisco, comprehensive programs (such as those utilized in SLO County) "are effective at promoting recovery and positive social changes for pregnant and parenting women and their children."<sup>2</sup>

Perinatal Substance Abuse Services have significant benefits for children because:

- they reduce the incidence of fetal drug effect and associated problems;
- they reduce the need for foster homes for drug-affected children;
- they prevent the damage to infants caused by exposure to drug-contaminated breast milk;
- they minimize the damage done to mother-infant bonding caused by removal of the child from the home.

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<sup>2</sup> [Womens Health](#). 1998 Fall; 4(3):231-54.

Perinatal Substance Abuse Services also have substantial benefits for substance-abusing and substance dependent mothers because:

- mothers who participate actively in the program are allowed to keep their children at home;
- for those mothers whose behavior has led to the removal of their children, the program provides realistic measures for having their children returned to them.
- the services improve the continuation of mother-child bonding by having the mother care for the infant for significant periods of time each day even when out of the home;
- a partnering element of the program allows some mothers and their preschool children to reside together in a live-in substance abuse program;
- the services allow many mothers to have their children returned to them within six months (the reunification timetable mandated by law), thus avoiding termination of parental rights and the adoption of the children.

### **Background**

San Luis Obispo Drug and Alcohol Services was providing perinatal substance abuse services prior to the Federal government's mandate leading to the creation and funding of such programs. Our local program has long been a model for other counties in the state. As a result of the statewide epidemic of "crack babies" and the Alcohol and Drug-Affected Mothers and Infants Act of 1990, the juvenile court asked Drug and Alcohol Services and other agencies in San Luis Obispo County to devise a plan for effectively dealing with this problem. The working group, supported by what was then called the Drug Advisory Board, met over several months and constructed a plan that ultimately became Perinatal Substance Abuse Services.

Throughout the years, this program has provided strong incentives to many women to overcome their drug dependency and to save their relationships with their children. It has allowed those whose children had been removed by the court to regain custody. It has prevented the removal of many children from their drug-dependent mothers in this County.

### **Recommendation Summary**

Given the success of the County's delivery of perinatal substance abuse services, as well as continued evidence of the need for such services, the Drug and Alcohol Advisory Board strongly supports the continuation of this program. It is hoped that with increased, efficient service-delivery, combined with sufficient funding, these services can be extended to all individuals in need in our county.